中央研究院近代史研究所集刊
第88期（民國104年6月），239-253
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# Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012. 502 pp.

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Barbara Mittler's *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* was awarded the 2013 John K. Fairbank Prize in East Asian History by the American Historical Association. In this richly illustrated cultural history Mittler examines primarily three genres of Cultural Revolution culture: music (model works and songs), texts (the *Three Character Classic* and the story "The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains"), and images (Mao portraits and comic books). As a scholar trained in both Sinology and musicology, the author's analysis of music is particularly expert. For students of modern Chinese art and culture, this book and its companion online exhibition and database make an important contribution.

The main puzzle or "central contradiction" of the book that Mittler seeks to solve is the "seemingly paradoxical phenomenon" of "the longevity of the Cultural Revolution propaganda art" while the Cultural Revolution has been commonly rejected. The author contends that Cultural Revolution culture, which has been frequently dismissed as mere propaganda, "was (and is) in practice and experience liked and enjoyed by many" (p. 7). Furthermore, from the perspective of *longue*

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*durée*, Mittler argues that Cultural Revolution propaganda art should "be seen as one development in the broader attempt to create a new but Chinese modern art and culture" from the late nineteenth and into the early twenty-first centuries (p. 10). Its cultural products "cannot be called 'deviant' from, but should more aptly be called 'high points' of, the revolutionary norm" (pp. 125-126). Similar to Paul Clark's thesis (2008), this book's larger intellectual objective is to reconceptualize the history of the Cultural Revolution and its pre- and post-history as "a continuous revolution."

Methodologically, the author consciously avoids politics and focuses on "artistic and cultural production and experience" (p. 386). By juxtaposing close readings of cultural products with the memories of experience from oral history, the author aims to demonstrate the popularity and longevity of Cultural Revolution culture. Based on these sources, Mittler strives to dispel the image of the Cultural Revolution as a period of "unprecedented cultural stagnation" (p. 18) and "the exclusively negative understanding of 'propaganda'" (p. 27).

While I applaud Mittler's intellectual commitment and painstaking efforts to do justice to the complicated cultural production and experience of the Cultural Revolution, I must confess that I find the book's definition of Cultural Revolution culture problematic, its methodology flawed (especially in its selective use of sources), its reference to Nazi Germany puzzling, and its theses overstated.

## What is Cultural Revolution culture? What is not?

Mittler effectively demonstrates the "continuous practice and development" of propaganda art per se during the Cultural Revolution, but her attempt to debunk the conventional view of the period as a time of "unprecedented cultural stagnation" is less successful. Logically speaking, the continuous development of propaganda art, which was only a particular type and a small subset of culture as

generally understood, does not negate the possibility of "cultural stagnation" as a broader trend. In fact, the flourishing of this one particular type of culture (propaganda art) was state-sanctioned and sometimes aided by mass violence, as manifested in the campaign to "Destroy the Four Olds." With the destruction of and restrictions on many other forms of culture, Cultural Revolution culture achieved its hegemonic status. Its dominance was not a result of its inherent artistic merit alone, but rather a product of the politics of Mao's rule that largely eliminated cultural choice. Given the politicized nature of Cultural Revolution culture, Mittler's decision to avoid politics—or more precisely political and historical contextualization—is self-limiting. Her culture-centric analysis avoids the ultimate driving force behind the success of propaganda art: Maoist politics.

Similarly, the continued popularity of Maoist cultural products in post-Mao China cannot be explained by their artistic value alone. Without taking political continuity into account, textual analysis of these products, no matter how detailed, has limited explanatory power.

A cultural history without sufficient political and historical contextualization inevitably creates confusions in periodization. Mittler rightly challenges the ten-year definition of the Cultural Revolution prescribed retroactively by Deng Xiaoping et al. Whereas Jonathan Unger, Anita Chan, and Michel Bonnin have long called for a more restrictive periodization of the Cultural Revolution that spanned from 1966 to 1968, or 1969 at the latest,[1] Mittler calls for a more expansive understanding. On one occasion she suggests a periodization of 1964-1978 (p. 384).

1 For example, Jonathan Unger, "The Cultural Revolution at the Grass Roots: a Review of *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*," *The China Journal*, 57 (Jan 2007), pp. 113-117; Michel Bonnin 潘鳴嘯, trans. Ouyang Yin 歐陽因譯，失落的一代：中國的上山下鄉運動（1968-1980）(*Génération perdue. Le mouvement d'envoi des jeunes instruits à la campagne en Chine, 1968-1980*) (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 2010), p. 4.

Even if one accepts Mittler's expanded periodization, a fundamental question remains: What is Cultural Revolution propaganda art? What is not? Mittler judiciously observes that it "did not appear out of the blue, but has a long pre-and post-history that can be traced from the late nineteenth and into the early twenty-first centuries" (p. 10). Many of the cultural products examined in the book had long histories before 1966 or even 1964 and their longevity is still visible in today's China. It is very difficult to distinguish propaganda art of the Cultural Revolution from what appeared before or after as they are so closely linked and often overlap.

Is it historically accurate to call all these cultural products and practices "Cultural Revolution propaganda art" just because they were in practice during the Cultural Revolution, even if they had appeared earlier? Probably not. The term is a misnomer. More appropriately, it should be called Maoist Art or Red Art, which is also the title chosen by independent filmmaker Hu Jie and literature scholar Ai Xiaoming for their independent documentary film mentioned by Mittler (p. 259).[2] Cultural Revolution propaganda art is a subset of Red Art (although in its most radical form). Likewise, Cultural Revolution culture as presented in this book can be more accurately termed Maoist Culture or Red Culture.

Most of the cultural products discussed in the book were in fact Red Art, i.e., with pre-histories dating before 1966. Some of the most radical, extreme forms of cultural products and practices invented specifically during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), such as the loyalty dance and anti-Confucian polemics, no longer exist today. Therefore, precisely speaking, what Mittler observes is not the longevity of Cultural Revolution propaganda art per se, but rather that of Red Art. Is the longevity of Red Art paradoxical?

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2 Hu Jie 胡杰 and Ai Xiaoming 艾曉明, 紅色美術 (Red Art) (Independent documentary film) (Hong Kong: Visible Record Company, 2007).

When the post-Mao leadership under Deng Xiaoping declared the Cultural Revolution a national catastrophe or "ten years of havoc" (十年浩劫), propaganda art of the era became one of the collateral casualties. Deng's rejection of the Cultural Revolution, however, was well-contained. With Lin Biao and the Gang of Four scapegoated, Mao was largely exculpated. While the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) has been rejected, the Maoist era (1949-1976) as a whole has not. In a 2013 speech China's current leader Xi Jinping exhorted CCP cadres "not to use the reform era to repudiate the pre-reform era, and vice versa,"[3] effectively reaffirming the overall positive assessment of the Maoist era.

Mirroring this very limited repudiation of the Maoist era, in the cultural realm certain Cultural Revolution cultural products and practices, such as the loyalty dance, have been dismissed, but Red Art in general has not been rejected. In fact, Red Art remains officially sanctioned and is frequently promoted. Bo Xilai's Red Culture campaign in Chongqing (2007-2012) laid bare the connection between the apparent popularity of Red Art and official mobilization. There is no contradiction between the popularity of Red Art of the long Maoist era and the repudiation of the Cultural Revolution as a ten-year political movement. Once these distinctions are made, the book's "central contradiction"—the "seemingly paradoxical phenomenon" of "the longevity of the Cultural Revolution propaganda art" (p. 7)—disappears.

## Methodology

As shown above, the author tends to treat larger concepts and their smaller subsets as equivalent (culture and propaganda culture, Red Art and Cultural

3 Xi Jinping 習近平, "毫不動搖堅持和發展中國特色社會主義" (Unswervingly Adhere to and Develop Socialism with Chinese Characteristics), Xinhuanet 新華網, January 5, 2013. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-01/05/c_114258698.htm (accessed July 15, 2014).

Revolution art) and uses them interchangeably. This pattern of imprecision often leads to conclusions larger than the evidence can support.

The author's discussion of model works is another example of conflation of concepts. Mittler effectively demonstrates that model works "make use of Chinese art forms as well as the bourgeois art form of classical and romantic music while filling both with new content" (p. 67). Then she concludes that "their artistic structure and content made these pieces anything but the product of an iconoclastic, and even less a xenophobic era, as the Cultural Revolution is so often described" (p. 75). Here the implicit straw man is the inference that because the Cultural Revolution was "iconoclastic" and "xenophobic," neither foreign nor Chinese traditional music forms were allowed. No scholar has made such a claim. A musical style with neither Western nor Chinese traditional elements is simply unthinkable, unless the Cultural Revolution composers were "from the stars."

In reality, the use of Western and traditional art forms had no bearing on the political nature of these model works. Likewise, the adoption of a foreign ideology, Marxism-Leninism, does not make the Chinese Communist Party any more or less xenophobic; just as the use of Western military technology does not make the People's Liberation Army any more or less anti-foreign. After all, Mao had said in *Yan'an Talks* in 1942 that CCP cultural workers "may not reject the ancients and foreigners as models" (p. 165). In February 1964 Mao formulated his famous dictum in a letter to the students of the Central Conservatory: "Make the past serve the present, and make foreign things serve China" (古爲今用, 洋爲中用). As Mao's instruction was known throughout China then and is also acknowledged in the book (pp. 53, 64), the fact that model works used both Western and Chinese art forms is no new discovery. The suggestion that this finding may alter the prevailing views of the Cultural Revolution is hardly

convincing.

The author uses a similar approach to "undo the myth that China's traditional philosophical heritage and canonical practice as such was utterly destroyed during and by the Cultural Revolution" (p. 137). By demonstrating that the Three Character Classic in its numerous new (politicized) incarnations were available and the Anti-Confucius Campaign might actually spread awareness of Confucianism, Mittler reaches a provocative conclusion: "Confucian culture was perpetuated not in spite of but because of its vilification during the Cultural Revolution years" (p. 187).

The *Three Character Classic* is only a tiny part of the Chinese cultural tradition. Its survival—largely in name only—in politicized and bastardized forms does not equate to the continuity of Chinese heritage. The attack on Confucius might have kindled the interest of certain curious young people, but at the same time systematic transmission of the Confucian classics was prohibited and Confucian scholars were persecuted en masse. Asserting that the vilification campaign actually perpetuated Confucianism is akin to arguing that by burning Confucian classics and burying scholars alive Qin Shihuang might have inadvertently perpetuated Confucianism.

The author's method of inductive generalization (i.e. arguing from particular cases to generalizations) without sufficient political and historical contextualization is flawed. Further compounding the problem, some of the samples used in the book are highly atypical. For instance, Mittler argues that during the Cultural Revolution some young people "watched foreign films, others listened to the Beatles, and almost every (sent-down) youth would carry his or her collection of 200 *Famous Foreign Songs* (外國名歌二百首) with them." One of her sources is a university professor born in the mid-1950s, who boldly asserts that

"[t]he understanding of China as insular during the Cultural Revolution is total nonsense" (p. 19). On the list of interviewees (p. 390) there are two university professors. One came from a family of cadres at a film academy in Beijing; another's parents were intellectuals, the mother a foreigner. They clearly fit the profile of the political and cultural elites in major cities. By no means were they representative of the tens of millions of youth of the time. The claim that "almost every (sent-down) youth" possessed a copy of the foreign song book is elitist hyperbole. Here the author chooses a very unusual sample and accepts the source's bold claim without critical analysis or qualification.

## Oral history

Mittler draws on a rich array of sources, including artifacts, texts, secondary works (mostly Western), memoirs, and interviews. Notably missing, however, are archival documents, which could have made this study better grounded. In terms of oral sources, instead of seeking out those individuals who were directly involved in the production of cultural artifacts, such as the model works, the author chose 40 individuals and asked them about their experiences, mainly as members of the audience.

One supposed strength of the book is its oral history sources, especially their representativeness: the 40 interviewees come from "many different class and generational backgrounds—from young taxi driver to elderly musician, from middle-aged journalist to housekeeper to museum curator" (p. 4). Mittler also acknowledges, however, that they "were randomly chosen from a group mostly involved in education, art, or media today." By virtue of their professions, this is not a representative sample.

The list of 40 interviewees appears impressive at first glance (pp. 389-390), but a closer look at the log belies the claim of class and generational diversity.

Out of the 40 interviewees, nine are taxi drivers, who are lumped together as one entry, while the rest have individual entries. Other than taxi drivers, there are only three interviewees who are not cultural elites: a businesswoman, a housekeeper, and a housewife; the rest are musicians, artists, professors, librarians, and writers mainly in Beijing and Shanghai.[4] This leaves this reader wondering if the taxi drivers were added as an afterthought or for window dressing.

In terms of age, 19 interviewees (all but two cultural elites) were born between 1949 and 1960. Most likely they became involved in art, music, or other types of propaganda work during the Cultural Revolution when they came of age. These experiences shaped their taste in music and art and in certain cases laid the foundations for their future professions as musicians, artists, etc. Therefore it is not surprising to hear about their positive experiences. Essentially, this is a very selective group with an inherent bias in favor of the author's conclusion. If the author had interviewed an older group who were educated under the Nationalists or a younger group—the people listening to pop music or watching videos on their cell phones—would she find the same attraction to Cultural Revolution art?[5]

As someone who has been regularly conducting oral history interviews for several years, I must confess that I find the author's efficiency astounding. Excluding the nine taxi driver interviews and three others done in Heidelberg, Germany, the rest of the interviews, 28 of them, were completed within two

4 The sample's urban and elite bias is also noted by another reviewer, see Denise Y. Ho, "Review of *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 72 (2013), p. 981. doi:10.1017/S0021911813001277.

5 In Julia Andrews's *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), the generation gap in Cultural Revolution experience is starkly portrayed: "Older artists in particular associate the artistic images of the Cultural Revolution very directly with the torture they suffered. For most young and middle-aged artists, however, the ten 'lost years' included a good deal of painting, even if it was not what we might consider high art" (p. 314). I thank Denise Ho for bringing Andrews's work to my attention.

weeks, from March 9 to 22, 2004. In two consecutive weeks, the author first did 14 interviews in Shanghai, then another 14 in Beijing. Each day one, two, or three persons were interviewed. On top of that, several taxi drivers were interviewed during this period.[6]

It is hard to imagine how, on such a tight schedule, all 100-plus interview questions could be completed in each interview, especially when many of the questions are open-ended (Appendix 2, pp. 391-393). Half of the non-taxi driver interviewees' precise years of birth are lacking; instead, readers are furnished with "1930s," "1940s?," "mid-1950s," or "ca. 1960." This situation does not inspire confidence, especially when the date of birth is listed as the first interview question (Appendix 2).

While many questions are more or less open-ended, one stands out as a leading question: "Would you be able to use one word to remember the Cultural Revolution by? Did the Cultural Revolution feel like a 'time of youth,' or a 'holocaust'?" (p. 392) No matter how benignly "holocaust" is translated in Chinese, such as 浩劫 (havoc) or 大災難 (catastrophe), few individuals would select it from this binary. Wittingly or unwittingly, Mittler designed a question to encourage a desired outcome.

## Other sources

Perhaps due to the book's extremely wide scope, the author sometimes appears to be unfamiliar with the background of certain sources. When readers open the book, they will first see the epigraph "I was born with dreams, and I died of dreams" (生於夢想 死於夢想) by Wang Jingyao, whose wife Bian Zhongyun was tortured to death by her students in August 1966.[7] I wonder if Mittler was

6 The appendix does not provide the exact dates of the taxi driver interviews.

7 Bian Zhongyun was the vice principal of the Girls' Middle School attached to Beijing Normal

aware of Wang's long-held view on Mao, which he reiterated in a recent interview: "He was the source of all evil. He did much that was bad."[8] Wang would certainly disagree with the main thrust of this book. For readers who have watched Hu Jie's documentary film *Though I Am Gone* 我雖死去 and are familiar with Wang Jingyao's lifelong pursuit of justice, they will find this book disorientating.

In the first sentence of the preface and the last sentence of the conclusion, Mittler twice quotes painter Huang Yongyu: "We have to admit that the Cultural Revolution was a very interesting drama. Unfortunately, the price of the ticket was too expensive" (pp. xi, 387). Mittler seems to suggest that Huang's emphasis is on "a very interesting drama," but clearly he means to highlight the cost. Omitted by the author is a sentence immediately following the above quotation: "So much time, so many lives, blood, and tears."[9] This leaves little doubt about where Huang stands. In 2013, Huang Yongyu again spoke emphatically about the Cultural Revolution: "I do not forgive, nor forget."[10]

In a brief discussion of Frank Capra's anti-Nazi propaganda film *Why We Fight*, Mittler writes: "Capra's film reproduces authentic material from Nazi propaganda films, most prominently among them Leni Riefenstahl's (1902-2003) *Triumph des Willens*, without introducing a single new scene" (p. 12). Mittler appears to be unaware of the fact that *Why We Fight* is a series of seven films and

University, not Beijing University as stated in footnote.

8 Chris Buckley, "Remorse Over Death Of Teacher In Mao Era," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2014. http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/13/bowed-and-remorseful-former-red-guard-recalls-teachers-death/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0 (accessed July 19, 2014).

9 Huang Yongyu 黃永玉, "大雅寶胡同甲二號安魂祭——謹以此文獻給可染先生、佩珠夫人和孩子們" (Dayabao Hutong No.2 Requiem: dedicated to Mr. Li Keran, Ms. Zou Peizhu, and Children) http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_71bc3e4b01011w3f.html (accessed July 28, 2014). The complete paragraph reads: "說起「文化大革命」，過去了那麼多年，排除了危難，你不能不說，「文化大革命」是一個非常有趣的戲劇。遺憾的是票價太貴。多少的光陰、生命、血、眼淚。"

10 Writer Jiang Fangzhou's 蔣方舟 Sina Weibo posting on her interview with Huang. October 13, 2013. http://www.weibo.com/1049198655/AdS7mveR5 (accessed July 19, 2014).

the Riefenstahl footage appears in the second episode *The Nazis Strike*. It is highly unlikely that an American propaganda film made in 1943 reproduced a Nazi propaganda film made in 1935 "without introducing a single new scene." In the 40-minute-long *The Nazis Strike*, Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* scenes account for only a few minutes. And some of the footage is heavily edited with new scenes of German war atrocities superimposed on the screen.[11] Capra's films are entirely different from the Nazis'. Mittler's theorizing about the possible subversive readings of propaganda thus becomes groundless. Perhaps Mittler reproduces misinformation from a secondary source (Thymian Bussemer 2000) or she misreads it. This mistake is especially regrettable as both films are readily available on the Internet.[12]

## The Nazi Germany comparison

Mittler starts the section "Art as Propaganda" in Introduction with a popular German joke about Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda master (p. 7). Then she proceeds to confess her own long-held puzzle: "Even for research purposes, it is not easy to get hold of the propaganda films from Germany's Nazi regime, but the propaganda model works from the Cultural Revolution are not only no longer restricted, but since the mid-1980s have been selling extremely well" (p. 8). Soon she suggests that "Mao 'the monster' and Mao 'the man' have somehow become decoupled, a phenomenon one could observe with Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) in Nazi Germany, as well" (p. 28). At the point, most readers will probably eagerly wait for the author to shed light on this Germany-China comparison, but they will be disappointed.

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[11] Wikipedia entry, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Why_We_Fight (accessed July 19, 2014).

[12] https://archive.org/details/TheNazisStrike and https://archive.org/details/TriumphOfTheWillgermanTriumphDesWillens (accessed July 19, 2014).

Throughout the book Nazi Germany is repeatedly mentioned but not analyzed at all. In one lengthy quotation from a writer interviewee, the Cultural Revolution is said to be "similar to the early Nazi period": "They gave us a healthy and simple life… There was some repression, but that was not the main thing!" (p. 376) Such a loaded statement requires analysis or qualification. Unfortunately, Mittler leaves it unexamined.

In her conclusion Mittler takes issue with Rana Mitter and argues that the memories of Mao's Cultural Revolution are different from those of Nazi Germany or the Khmer Rouge's Cambodia (p. 384). She explains that the difference "may have to do with the fact that the experience of the Cultural Revolution is, after all, not so unanimously accepted as 'trauma' by everyone" (p. 385). Irrespective of the validity of Mittler's argument, most readers cannot fail to see the most glaring difference between these cases: the regimes of Nazi Germany and the Khmer Rouge were defeated and overthrown, but Mao's regime survived and remains in power.

Let us imagine for a moment the counterfactual: suppose the Third Reich prevailed in WWII, National Socialism still remains enshrined in the German constitution, and Hitler's portrait is hanging on the Brandenburg Gate. Unlike in the present-day Federal Republic of Germany (1949-), where pro-Nazi propaganda is criminalized, in this fictional contemporary Third Reich, Nazi propaganda films would be freely available and might even sell extremely well. Perhaps a foreign observer would write a book entitled *A Continuous Reich: Making Sense of Nazi Culture*. Unsettling as this scenario might be, it raises legitimate questions about the comparability of Nazi Germany and Mao's China, and the ultimate explanation for the longevity of Maoist Culture.

## Conclusion

This book's main target is the conventional view of the Cultural Revolution as a period of cultural stagnation, destruction, and suppression. Mittler begins the book by challenging Jung Chang 張戎—the author of *Mao: the Unknown Story* (2005)—for not asking "why a man, Mao Zedong, and the propaganda of his time, a time of extreme cultural repression, remains so popular today." She asserts that such questions and thoughts "never occur to Jung Chang" (p. 28). The author quotes Thomas Bernstein's denunciation of Chang's book as "a major disaster for the contemporary China field" (p. 27). This reader is left wondering how someone who is not even in the field could create a major disaster for the field, unless the field had been vulnerable in the first place. Just as Mittler decided to focus on culture and avoid politics, perhaps Jung Chang decided to focus on politics and avoid culture. In fact, readers may find Chang's answer to Mittler's questions in the epilogue: "Today, Mao's portrait and his corpse still dominate Tiananmen Square in the heart of the Chinese capital. The current Communist regime declares itself to be Mao's heir and fiercely perpetuates the myth of Mao."[13] Mittler may find this answer unsatisfactory, but it seems unfair to accuse Chang for being oblivious to the longevity of the Mao myth and its attendant culture.

Coincidentally, the elephant in the room is also noted by Cui Jian (1961- ), the godfather of Chinese rock music, whose songs Mittler examines in great detail (pp. 105-106, 114-116). Recently Cui spoke to young people: "Don't think that because you are twenty or thirty years younger than I am that we are not the same generation. As long as Chairman Mao's portrait is still hanging on Tiananmen, we all live in the same age."[14]

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13 Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005), p. 631.

14 Cui Jian interview with Sina.com, "崔健坦承孤獨：我的思想和年輕人一樣" (Cui Jian: My Ideas

Despite the book's important contribution to the study of propaganda culture in Maoist China, this reviewer is alarmed by the author's sample selection bias and the problematic treatment of sources, and therefore remains unconvinced by the larger conclusions she draws. To end this review, let me also borrow the metaphor made by Huang Yongyu that "the Cultural Revolution was a very interesting drama" (p. 387). In this drama, the only show in town, performers were dancing in fetters. Nonetheless they were dancing, as Mittler probably would argue. She may also rightly point out that a select few dancers actually enjoyed the performance, as did some members of the audience. Yet, I still believe, most dancers and spectators would rather have quit the show, if they had had a choice.

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Are the Same as Young People's), http://ent.sina.com.cn/y/2012-12-11/23183809249_2.shtml (accessed July 19, 2014).